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SUBJECT: BELARUS INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS REMAIN UNDER PRESSURE: A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT

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11. Summary. In the run up to the 2006 Presidential elections, the GOB banned independent newspapers that covered politics from having access to the state monopoly kiosk network and the postal service's subscription system. In 2008 and 2009, in an apparent response to western sanctions, a handful of national and regional papers regained access; but nevertheless as late as January 2010, three nationals and eight regional publications continued to have problems. Authorities, at the same time, have demonstrated a willingness to use an assortment of the tools available to them in ongoing efforts to keep independent voices from reaching the public. Cited by authorities for criticizing the government, a regional independent newspaper editor has provided us with details on the obstacles he faced over the past year while struggling to keep his paper in business, including curbs on circulation, controls on printing services, denial of accreditation, tax investigations, and even difficulties for family members. His first-hand account provides insight into methods used against regime critics in Belarus and reveals how a pattern of pressure continues to restrict press freedoms. End Summary.

12. Prior to the March 2006 presidential elections, the GOB, as of January 1, 2006, banned national and regional independent newspapers that covered politics from having access to the state monopoly kiosk network and the postal service's subscription system. As late as 2008, the 15 core independent newspapers, five national and ten regional, continued to face circulation restrictions. In an apparent response to western sanctions, in November 2008, independent national newspapers Narodnaya Volya and Nasha Niva regained access to the two state monopoly systems. Of the ten regional newspapers, one returned to the distribution system in September 2009 and one went out of business in 2009. In January 2010, the situation with the remaining three national and eight regional publications was still pending resolution.

13. In addition, authorities have applied a range of measures against the editor and owner of an independent weekly newspaper, illustrative of the wider pattern of pressure that restricts press freedoms in Belarus. Anatoly Bukas, who edits an established regional weekly, Borisovskie Novosti (BN), in the city of Barysau, described for the Chargi challenges he faced last year after a regional ideology officer ordered local newsstands not to carry his paper. Told that BN had "discredited the government," Bukas complained to police, who refused to investigate the merits of charges against him. As a result, BN was taken off the shelves of local shops as the owners opted to avoid having problems with local authorities.

¶4. BN and other independents also face obstacles in accessing newsmakers and official events. Journalists are credentialed on a case-by-case basis, with independents routinely denied accreditation for state functions. Contracting for printing services is another pressure point. Bukas said a Minsk printing house would only agree to a contract after the transaction had been approved by officials in the Presidential Administration. At a personal level, Bukas suspects his son's failure to receive a university internship was payback for his own independent journalism, and added that even his siblings keep their family ties from authorities, fearing they could lose their jobs.

¶5. Authorities have also used regulatory and legal measures against Bukas and his paper. When BN's trade license expired at the end of October, Barysau regional officials refused an extension, putting the paper in legal jeopardy and at financial risk. Tax authorities, claiming violations of trade regulations stemming back to 2008, are seeking \$5,600 in arrears, and a court ruled in December to freeze Bukas' bank accounts, and ordered payment of the alleged tax arrears along with \$250 in court fees.

¶6. Comment: Bukas' description of challenges confronted over the past year in keeping his paper in business is an insightful first-hand account of the tool box of options available to authorities for curbing independence by the press in Belarus. Less clear from his account is what sort of accommodation independents are required to make with the government in order to ease pressures and operate more freely. On balance, while several newspapers were returned to circulation, the authorities continued efforts to stifle criticism of the regime through limiting access to the market place and mechanisms described above highlights that the GOB continues to fall short of undertaking meaningful steps on press freedoms. It is unlikely that prior to the April 25 local elections the harassment of

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independent newspapers will abate or greater access to distribution networks will be granted. These newspapers remain committed to providing their readers transparent coverage of elections, including the campaigns of opposition candidates, and the GOB is well aware of this fact. End Comment. SCANLAN